

“THE HEAVENS AND THE EARTH:  
GRAECO-ROMAN, ANCIENT CHINESE  
AND MEDIAEVAL ISLAMIC IMAGES  
OF THE WORLD” BY VITTORIO COTESTA

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When the history of the present within Anglophone sociology comes to be written, the decline of historically-oriented forms of analysis will likely be identified as a marked and lamentable tendency (Inglis 2013). Then again, if such a tendency continues at the current rate the likelihood of such a history ever being written diminishes in equal measure. More than (m)any other field(s) of sociological enquiry, “the sociology of civilizations”, can be rightfully considered as one in which the present is, in a certain sense, of less interest than the past which preceded it (Tiryakian 1976). Perhaps it is more accurate to say, that the function of the present is to serve as a point of reference against which to reconsider the significance of the past for understanding the uniqueness, or not, of the present – often, but not necessarily – in ways intended to cast light on how things may, or may not, develop in(to) the future.

This is certainly how Weber sought to rethink the relationship between present, past and future in his historical analyses of the world religions and their significance for understanding the uniqueness of the West. Weber is a foundational figure in the sociology of civilizations, a tradition which, since his early death in 1920, has developed through a number of “stages” to date, but that invariably lead back to and take inspiration from him in one form or another (Tiryakian 2004). Weber’s presence looms large in Vittorio Cotesta’s *The Heavens and the Earth*, the latest in a number of historically-oriented studies by Cotesta to deal with a range of macro-sociological themes including, globalisation,

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human rights, capitalism and modernity, to name but a few. Whereas Weber's focus on the civilizations of the past was motivated by his attempt to come to terms with the uniqueness of the West, *The Heavens and the Earth* is a study in which the past is brought to life with a view to undermining the alleged uniqueness of the "global society" we presently inhabit.

The main "interpretative hypothesis" on which Cotesta's study rests is that "global society" is not new (Cotesta 2021: 8). Or, rather, not as new as some people think and others still would have us believe. Quite the opposite, in fact: "well before our time, scholars were aware of the unitary character of the world. Many philosophers' or historians' investigations, adopted, let us say, a global perspective" (Cotesta 2021: 8). This is because global society "is the result of 'longue duree' historical processes" (Cotesta 2021: 1). Narrowly conceived, this study is both counter and corrective to a number of prevailing (mis)conceptions regards the "newness" of globalisation and global society. For some, the global society in which we live is born of processes which "date back to the last few decades only and the rise of the Internet" (Cotesta 2021: 1); for others, the origins of global society have arisen as a coincidence of the collision of modernity and capitalism. Either way, both are misguided. Moreover, that trans-local worlds "and forms of globalisation exist from antiquity", render deeply problematic the kinds of monocausal explanation which hold "technology" to be the "motor of human history" (Cotesta 2021: 1).

Having identified presentism and technologism alike as two of the most pervasive myths the study seeks to dispel, Cotesta uses the remainder of the introduction to explicate the conceptual tools and methods he draws on to address the broader aims of the book: namely to trace out and reconstruct the emergence – and divergence – of globally-oriented forms of consciousness and "images of the world, of God, the Universe, of society and of power" within "three great civilizations: the Graeco-Roman, Chinese and medieval Islamic" (Cotesta 2021: xii). Two concepts in particular are central to the organisation and framing of the study: "axial period" and "axial revolution".

The concepts "axial period" and "axial revolution" were developed by the philosopher Karl Jaspers, a close friend and



associate of Weber. Jaspers used the concepts to capture a fundamental transformation to the structure of human consciousness occurring during the first millennium BCE, but more specifically, the centuries spanning approximately 800 to 200 BCE. Characterised by what one might refer to “in modern terms” as “self-reflexivity”, the transformation in human consciousness was both cause and consequence of two developments in particular (Cotesta 2021: 3): on the one hand, “a rejection of the explanations of the origins of the physical and social world based on myth and poetry”; and, the shift towards seeking “a ‘rational’ explanation” of the origins and structure of the world, on the other (Cotesta 2021: 9). Jaspers developed the concept, “axial period”, in and through his analysis of the civilizations of ancient Greece, China and India during the first millennium.

In its original formulation, Jaspers’ concept of “axial period” was tied to specific civilizational units during a specific period of time. Given this is the case, the move to incorporate medieval Islamic civilization into the purview of his analysis calls forth both explanation and justification. How does Cotesta convince us that the move is a legitimate one? The short version of the explanation is set out in the introductory chapter; the long(er) version is elaborated in the section of the study entitled “intermezzo”, a section of the book that bridges the shift in analysis from ancient Graeco-Roman and Chinese to medieval Islamic civilization. I shall address the contents of the intermezzo further on in the review. Insofar as it is used to provide a fuller treatment of the rationale for incorporating medieval Islamic civilization into the study, it makes sense to address it now.

Key here is the analytical move of distinguishing between and separating out the nature and quality of the revolution in human consciousness to occur from its temporal and civilizational situatedness. This is the view that, an, as opposed to the, “axial revolution” can be understood to (have) occur(ed) where-and-when-ever mankind’s relationship to the world can be shown to have undergone the kinds of transformation in existential orientation and explanation associated with, but not confined, to the “axial period”. Put another way, Cotesta lifts the concept “axial revolution” out from the master concept of “axial period” in which it was originally nested, with the aim of



using it to denote “all cases of radical change in visions of the world” (Cotesta 2021: 10). And this is what Cotesta does: he decouples the revolution in human consciousness from its temporal and territorial moorings. In doing so, he points to similar analytic moves made by and in the works of Voegelin and Eisenstadt respectively. More broadly, the decision not to extend the study further back in time than the first millennium is one Cotesta discusses in relation to two main factors. The first concerns the availability and quality of primary historical texts e.g., copies and translations of original historical works, and the vast infrastructure of scholarly literature to have grown up around them. Were it not for the existence of these, the kind of “second level” analysis undertaken by Cotesta would simply not be possible. Cotesta is forthcoming regards the debt of scholarship he owes to specialists operating in and across a wide range of (inter)disciplinary terrains and “individual topics” (Cotesta 2021: 11). The originality of this study resides not in the collation or bringing to light of new historical data, but the nexus of analytical concerns brought to bear on the scholarly terrains that it uses to re-think and traverse. The second factor, concerns issues of historical continuity. More concretely put, it is precisely because “a conspicuous part of humanity still lives today” (Cotesta 2021: xii) in the foundations laid by the ancient Graeco-Roman, Chinese and medieval Islamic civilizations, that they retain their significance for tracking the historical origins of global society today.

In addressing questions of method it is worth to emphasise the clarity of writing throughout the book, which considerably facilitates the task of coming to terms with the scale and scope of the material subject to analysis. The exposition of huge tracts of historical knowledge, intricate systems of religious and secular thought, social and political ideals, structures and principles, and so on and so forth, are rendered in a lively, clear and engaging manner throughout. Similarly, the task of identifying patterns of difference and convergence in and between civilizational units in a manner purged of evaluative judgements, is one which Cotesta takes great care to uphold. In a manner that recalls Marcel Mauss’ injunction that the analyst should desist from referring back to one’s own civilization as the basis for



making evaluative claims, Cotesta is careful to note that “presuming that mankind is only one, our analysis shall never overestimate *a priori* any one of the civilizations dealt with nor claim that any differences are a sign of superiority or inferiority” (Cotesta 2021: 279).

The study proper is situated within a complex but coherent architecture organised into three parts. Parts one, two and three correspond to Graeco-Roman, Chinese and medieval Islamic civilization respectively. Within each part, “the goal of reconstruct[ing] images of the world, of humanity and society”, how they took hold, developed, and diversified subsequently, is divided up and out into a series of inter-related sections and sub-sections (Cotesta 2021: 11). Sections are used to reconstruct the broadest aspects of each civilizational whole e.g. “The Universe, Nature, and Humanity in Ancient Greece”, with many being further broken down into a number of sub-sections e.g. “2.1 Plato’s Utopic model”, “2.2 Aristotle’s *politeia* as a Form of Mixed Government”.

Notably, the length of analysis devoted to each of the three civilizations varies. The parts on Graeco-Roman and medieval Islamic civilization run to approximately 180 and 200 pages respectively; the part on ancient Chinese civilization comprises 66 pages in total. The significance of this disparity, if any, goes unremarked upon by Cotesta – as to why exactly, I am unsure. The inclusion of an “intermezzo”, which follows on from the analyses of the Graeco-Roman and Chinese cases, is used to bridge the analysis of medieval Islamic civilization. Therein three main issues are addressed. These comprise: convergences and divergences between ancient Graeco-Roman and Chinese civilization; the development of a “world-system” centring on trade, in and through which parts of Eurasia, including India, were directly and indirectly connected; and, as previously stated, the rationale behind the incorporation of medieval Islamic civilization into the purview of the analysis. And so it is through dividing up and out the various facets of three civilizations, each comprised of “elements received from others” and that each “re-elaborate[s] according to its own perspective”, that the analysis proceeds (Cotesta 2021: 290). While there is not the space here to demonstrate the artful rendering and



integration of the vast amount of historical works and scholarship covered in the main body of the analysis, it would be remiss not to acknowledge the eloquence with which Cotesta reconstructs the many systems of thought, religious and secular; the institutional contexts they founded and/or were absorbed into; and the economic, social, political, cultural and geographical structures on which they converged and diverged.

The concluding chapter draws together the many strands of the analysis by way of seven short and illuminating sections. Concision is a virtue albeit one that many scholars fail to live up to. Not so for Cotesta, who organises the discussion of the “main findings” of his analysis around the master categories of “unity” and “divergence”. How and in what ways does the transformation to mankind’s relationship to the world result in diverse images of the world as totality? And in what ways do the different civilizations demonstrate a unity of response in spite of the divergent forms they take? The first section of the conclusion re-joins and reflects back on “the problems and research methods”, while the remaining six sections use these questions to reconsider conceptions of the universe, time, the *oikoumene*, socio-political structures, modes of government, and human rights. Herein, the themes are considered on the terms set by each of the three civilizations and comparatively too.

In conclusion, *The Heavens and the Earth* is a richly informed and highly informative piece of scholarship that contributes to the sociology of civilizations more generally and the history of globalisation specifically. In reconstructing the development of images and visions of the world in and across ancient Graeco-Roman, Chinese and medieval Islamic civilizations, Cotesta demonstrates the centrality of meaning as a key analytical domain for getting to grips with the earliest moments of globalisation and globally-oriented forms of consciousness. In that the book successfully achieves these aims, it plays an important part in ensuring that citizens and scholars of the world alike, remain alert to the limited and limiting effects of accounts of globalisation that see global society as the outcome of more recent and technologically-driven processes and change. As read from my own perspective as an historically-oriented cultural sociologist, it strikes me that the significance of this book



extends beyond its manifest contribution to the sociology of civilizations and globalisation. What Cotesta has produced here is a study which sensitizes us to and raises questions about what stands to be gained from a Weber-inspired historical cultural sociology of globalisation and global society. That is to say, one which draws inspiration from the analytical resources and methods developed by Weber but that to date have yet to be adequately revived and revaluated for the purposes of developing forms of analysis specifically attuned to grasping the cultural dimensions of a far greater range of global forms and phenomena, past and present.

To my mind, such a task seems particularly pressing when we consider that arguably more so than Durkheim, presently subject to reconsecration and resignification as the patron-saint of cultural sociology, Weber's work was highly attentive to the kinds of long-term historical processes by which thought forms and belief-systems from the past come to inhabit the cultural landscapes of the present, often in radically altered guises and with effects that are scarcely, if at all, recognised. Re-viewed in this way, the triumph of *The Heavens and the Earth* is twofold: on the one hand, it eloquently and cogently demonstrates the historical origins of the globalised and globalising present in the civilizations of the ancient Graeco-Roman, Chinese and medieval Islamic past; and on the other, it sensitizes us to Weber's significance as a thinker whose work provides the resources for developing an historical cultural sociology of globalisation capable of reconnecting us to the past at a time when the tendency to retreat into the present threatens to span on and into the immediate and foreseeable future.

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